

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF FAMILY FARE IN BANG CHAN

- 261 As we turn to a detailed description of the family fare,
701 we should like to point out that starvation was unknown in
Bang Chan. Although much room remains for improvement in
diet, "hollow hunger" was uncommon. In the few times when
731 disastrous flood destroyed the year's crop, the government
was able to provide enough rice so that it need not be ra-
133 tioned. People still ate their fill. Even floods had their
286 advantage: one could fish out the window. That gross caloric
undernutrition was rare was borne out by examination of the
146 school children (Hauck, 1956). "On the average . . . Bang
145 Chan children could not be considered as markedly under-
weight. Few were so thin that one could 'count their ribs'
and still fewer would be considered plump by American
141 standards." In a random sample of village households that
included about 10% of the population, the heaviest man
weighed 69 kg. (151.8 pounds) and the heaviest woman 70 kg.
(154 pounds). We noted no more than half a dozen adults who
appeared to be "overweight." Most were middle aged or older,
and none of them did strenuous field work.

Sources of Food

Home Production, Storage and Preservation

- 262 Rice. - Rice is an essential part of any Thai meal.
The majority of the rice farmers in Bang Chan had rice for
256 home consumption milled for them at Minburi. In general,
[251] they took their own paddy to the mill, and brought the re-
sulting milled rice home, where it was stored in a box or
mat-bin. Although, according to a recent survey (Goldsen and
Balis, 1957) nearly a third of the households owned a home
rice mill, undermilled or home-pounded rice was not widely
used in Bang Chan. Information on this point was obtained
[26] for 333 of 336 "kitchen-unit" households in the village. Of
these 5 consumed home-milled rice only, 51 used home-milled
rice in major part, 78 in minor part, and 199 not at all.

- 221 In households where home-milled rice was used, during
256 June enough would be pounded to last until harvest, at which
time hands were sore and bleeding from the field work and
home pounding was impossible. At the time when data for the
508 present report were being gathered, most families took paddy
256 to the mill when water in the canal was high enough so that
it could be transported by boat. If a farmer on a subsidiary

- [232] 1. In some large houses, two related family groups
lived together but maintained separate kitchens.

854 medications were taken internally, sometimes being painted on
278 the tongue with a feather; but two preparations were applied
over the abdomen. Some of the medications were described as
"stomach medicine" or "to prevent flatulence." Five different
kinds of proprietary medicine were given to 18 infants. In 13
instances, the medicine given was clearly homemade and included
as major ingredients items such as flattery fruit, (3)luug
(1)yaunau; cobra oil; horseshoe crab; and buffalo skin. The
nature of the medicine, whether homemade or proprietary, was
not clear in 8 instances. Usually medicine for infants was
mixed with honey, but in 2 cases, alcoholic liquor was used as
it customarily was for the mother.

Six newborn infants in this series were given no medicine.
One of these was born at the Health Center. One of the other 2
infants delivered at the Health Center was given homemade medi-
cine later, and no information was obtained on the third. Eye
prophylaxis¹ was probably routine at the Health Center, as, in
2 of the 3 cases delivered there, informants knew that drops had
been put in the infant's eyes. Traditional midwives, however,
did nothing of this sort.

Water for Drinking and Bathing.

853 For the newborn infant as well as for the mother, water for
312 drinking and bathing was boiled and was usually used while hot,
often being kept warm in a vacuum bottle. Either rain water or
canal water might be used depending on what was available at a
given season. The water was dribbled from an adult's fingers
into the infant's mouth. When the mother was no longer lying by
the fire, boiled water was not considered essential for the infant.
Nevertheless, over half the infants seen from this time up to 3
months of age were being given boiled water to drink. After 6
months of age this was rare.

853 In one instance, during the time when a younger sibling
855 received boiled canal water, a 21-month old child was given
312 boiled water also. At the time of a later visit both of these
children were drinking unboiled canal water. In another case
an orphaned boy's formula was made up with boiled water, although

[744] 1. Vaccination for smallpox was the only modern preventive
[75] treatment which we knew to be used in Bang Chan in the absence
[731] of an epidemic. Since a severe epidemic of smallpox with many
deaths ten years previously, health officers came to the Bang
Chan elementary school once a year to vaccinate children, and
other residents of the community could be vaccinated at this
time. Four of the young children whom we visited periodically
were vaccinated, at 4 months, 8 months, 1 and 2 years of age,
respectively.

THAI PEASANT PERSONALITY

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to be somewhat nervous. Like the conversational topics mentioned above, its purpose is to maintain social contact, but at a minimal substantive level.

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Other uses of giggling are less consciously purposeful than the above. Perhaps the most frequent instance of this is when villagers are talking about or responding directly to an unfortunate situation: a flood destroying the rice crop, a friend or relative dying or being beaten up, a person committing suicide. Giggling under these circumstances seems to represent several related sentiments. On the one hand, it indicates a slight feeling of embarrassment over having discovered something or talked about something which would have been better left undiscovered and undiscussed. At the same time, it is an attempt to make light of the misfortune by suggesting that the speaker and those present should not be overly pained by what they are encountering. Giggling here serves very much the same kind of function as the phrase *maj pen raj* ("it is nothing") referred to earlier; it is a means of shrugging off and denying a feeling of distress. Finally, giggling often is also a kind of ironic commentary on the human situation—not in any abstract philosophical way, but in the sense that a tragedy is so often actually felt to be a comic exposure of human hopes and intentions. A little exchange between the writer and an elderly villager perhaps best illustrates this. During one of the two rainy seasons I spent in Thailand, the rains were especially heavy in the Central Plain and destroyed the rice crop of many Bang Chan farms. As might be expected, it was a topic of considerable discussion. Paddling down the canal one morning, we met a villager who was returning from inspecting his fields, and we stopped to chat. The discussion inevitably turned to the flood, and he told us, in a completely matter-of-fact way, that he had already lost about 50 percent of his crop. He then giggled nervously over what he had said, and followed it up with, "But that person over there has lost everything." His giggles then turned into laughter as he nodded his head in an attitude of pain. Months later, when things were considerably more comfortable for the villager (as it turned out, he had lost only about 5 percent of his crop) I recalled our meeting and asked him what he thought was so funny about the flood. He did not remember, but volunteered in a nice, didactic way: "When something like a flood happens, all you can do is laugh."

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Giggling is also a favored mode of dealing with the countless situations that arise in daily life that are perceived by the villagers as potentially, or imminently, embarrassing. Here giggling is a substitute for an explanation of one's actions, particularly those that are considered annoying to others. Villagers who have missed an important appointment (lesser ones are missed with few qualms) will tend to giggle when they finally meet the person and there is the slightest indication of the latter's displeasure.

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The monsoon climate of the region in which the village lies gives the area an annual rainfall, averaged over a recent ten year period, of about fifty inches; the effective rainfall, for the critical months when the rice is in the ground, is about forty inches.³ The minimum precipitation requirement for wet rice is about seventy inches a year. This rainfall deficiency in the central plain of Thailand is made up by direct flooding from the rivers which flow in from the mountains and plateaux on the northeast, north, and west, the run-off rate fortunately being low because forests still cover much of these uplands. The whole plain is channeled for simple distribution of the spate of these rivers which occurs during October, November, and December, just before the harvest of rice. Because most fields are fed by gravity without an artificial head of water, or with only small heads impounded behind water gates, the depth and duration of flooding cannot be wholly controlled. As a result, variable water supply produces a wide variability in harvests and crop risks may be considerable. For 117 years between 1831 and 1948 the ministry of Agriculture records four major damaging floods (1831, 1879, 1917, and 1942), four years of extreme drought, thirty-five years of severe drought, and twenty-one years of moderate drought, leaving only fifty-three years of optimal supply of water.⁴

3. Central Service of Statistics, Statistical Yearbook of Thailand, No. 21, 1939-40-1944. Bangkok, 1950.

4. Ministry of Agriculture, Thailand and Her Agricultural Problems (Bangkok, 1950).

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Finally, it has been pointed out that the kind of training and the type of financial preparation given to young married couples have served only to confirm Bangchan people to their preference for rice cultivation. This together with limited job opportunities open to them elsewhere have tended to keep the villagers on the farms, and thus have tended to regenerate the condition of population pressure in Bangchan.

Lack of Effective Control and Regulation of Water Supply

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[731] Another contributing factor is the lack of effective control and regulation of water supply, which has caused annual fluctuation of rice crop. On the whole, this crop fluctuation is not as high as is the case in most of rice growing areas elsewhere. Famine certainly has not been known in Bangchan. Nevertheless, it is a certain sector of rice growers -- the marginal farmers with limited ability to adjust or with relatively little command over capital -- who are seriously affected by annual fluctuation of rice crop.

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When affluent farmers have a poor crop, their credit purchase accounts may go up beyond the normal level, but they are usually in a position to clear this type of high interest bearing debts at the end of the business year by their net cash incomes or at least by securing loans with lower rates of interest to pay the accounts. On the other hand, marginal farmers are not in a position to seek low interest bearing loans. In case of crop failure, therefore,